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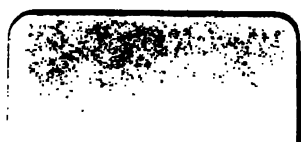
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# HUMORESQUE

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BOOKS BY  
**FANNIE HURST**

**HUMORESQUE**

**HUMORESQUE: Photoplay Edition**

**GASLIGHT SONATAS**

**EVERY SOUL HATH ITS SONG**

**JUST AROUND THE CORNER**

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**HARPER & BROTHERS, NEW YORK**  
**ESTABLISHED 1817**

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THERE WAS THAT IN SARAH KANTOR'S FACE THAT WAS ACTUALLY LYRICAL

# HUMORESQUE

A LAUGH ON LIFE WITH  
A TEAR BEHIND IT ☞ ☞

By FANNIE HURST

Author of "GASLIGHT SONATAS" Etc.



HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS  
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**HUMOROUS**

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***To***  
***Daniel Frohman***





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# **HUMORESQUE**



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ON either side of the Bowery, which cuts through like a drain to catch its sewage, Every Man's Land, a reeking march of humanity and humidity, steams with the excrement of seventeen languages, flung in *patois* from tenement windows, fire-escapes, curbs, stoops, and cellars whose walls are terrible and spongy with fungi.

By that impregnable chemistry of race whereby the red blood of the Mongolian and the red blood of the Caucasian become as oil and water in the mingling, Mulberry Street, bounded by sixteen languages, runs its intact Latin length of push-carts, clothes-lines, naked babies, drying vermicelli; black-eyed women in rhinestone combs and perennially big with child; whole families of buttonhole-makers, who first saw the blue-and-gold light of Sorrento, bent at home work round a single gas flare; pomaded barbers of a thousand Neapolitan amours. And then, just as suddenly, almost without osmosis and by the mere stepping down from the curb, Mulberry becomes Mott Street, hung in grill-work balconies, the moldy smell of poverty touched up with incense. Orientals whose feet shuffle and whose faces are

## HUMORESQUE

carved out of satinwood. Forbidden women, their white, drugged faces behind upper windows. Yellow children, incongruous enough in Western clothing. A draughty areaway with an oblique of gaslight and a black well of descending staircase. Show-windows of jade and tea and Chinese porcelains.

More streets emanating out from Mott like a handful of crooked rheumatic fingers, then suddenly the Bowery again, cowering beneath Elevated trains, where men burned down to the butt end of soiled lives pass in and out and out and in of the knee-high swinging doors, a veiny-nosed, acid-eaten race in themselves.

Allen Street, too, still more easterly, and half as wide, is straddled its entire width by the steely, long-legged skeleton of Elevated traffic, so that its third-floor windows no sooner shudder into silence from the rushing shock of one train than they are shaken into chatter by the passage of another. Indeed, third-floor dwellers of Allen Street, reaching out, can almost touch the serrated edges of the Elevated structure, and in summer the smell of its hot rails becomes an actual taste in the mouth. Passengers, in turn, look in upon this horizontal of life as they whiz by. Once, in fact, the blurry figure of what might have been a woman leaned out, as she passed, to toss into one Abraham Kantor's apartment a short-stemmed pink carnation. It hit softly on little Leon Kantor's crib, brushing him fragrantly across the mouth and causing him to pucker up.

Beneath, where even in August noonday, the

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sun cannot find its way by a chink, and babies lie stark naked in the cavernous shade, Allen Street presents a sort of submarine and greenish gloom, as if its humanity were actually moving through a sea of aqueous shadows, faces rather bleached and shrunk from sunlessness as water can bleach and shrink. And then, like a shimmering background of orange-finned and copper-flanked marine life, the brass-shops of Allen Street, whole rows of them, burn flamelessly and without benefit of fuel.

To enter Abrahm Kantor's—Brasses, was three steps down, so that his casement show-window, at best filmed over with the constant rain of dust ground down from the rails above, was obscure enough, but crammed with copied loot of khedive and of czar. The seven-branch candlestick so biblical and supplicating of arms. An urn, shaped like Rebecca's, of brass, all beaten over with little pocks. Things—cups, trays, knockers, ikons, gargoyles, bowls, and teapots. A symphony of bells in graduated sizes. Jardinières with fat sides. A pot-bellied samovar. A swinging-lamp for the dead, star-shaped. Against the door, an octave of tubular chimes, prisms of voiceless harmony and of heatless light.

Opening this door, they rang gently, like melody heard through water and behind glass. Another bell rang, too, in tilted singsong from a pulley operating somewhere in the catacomb rear of this lambent vale of things and things and things. In turn, this pulley set in toll still another bell, two flights up in Abrahm Kantor's tenement, which overlooked the



## HUMORESQUE

front of whizzing rails and a rear wilderness of gibbet-looking clothes-lines, dangling perpetual specters of flapping union suits in a mid-air flaky with soot.

Often at lunch, or even the evening meal, this bell would ring in on Abrahm Kantor's digestive well-being, and while he hurried down, napkin often bib-fashion still about his neck, and into the smouldering lanes of copper, would leave an eloquent void at the head of his well-surrounded table.

This bell was ringing now, jingling in upon the slumber of a still newer Kantor, snuggling peacefully enough within the ammoniac depths of a cradle recently evacuated by Leon, heretofore impinged upon you.

On her knees before an oven that billowed forth hotly into her face, Mrs. Kantor, fairly fat and not yet forty, and at the immemorial task of plumb-ing a delicately swelling layer-cake with broom-straw, raised her face, reddened and faintly moist.

"Isadore, run down and say your papa is out until six. If it's a customer, remember the first asking-price is the two middle figures on the tag, and the last asking-price is the two outside figures. See once, with your papa out to buy your little brother his birthday present, and your mother in a cake, if you can't make a sale for first price."

Isadore Kantor, aged eleven and hunched with a younger Kantor over an oilcloth-covered table, hunched himself still deeper in a barter for a large crystal marble with a candy stripe down its center.

"Izzie, did you hear me?"

"Yes 'm."

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"Go down this minute—do you hear? Rudolph, stop always letting your big brother get the best of you in marbles. Iz-zie!"

"In-a-minute."

"Don't let me have to ask you again, Isadore Kantor!"

"Aw, ma, I got some 'rithmetic to do. Let Esther go!"

"Always Esther! Your sister stays right in the front room with her spelling."

"Aw, ma, I got spelling, too."

"Every time I ask that boy he should do me one thing, right away he gets lessons! With me, that lessons-talk don't go no more. Every time you get put down in school, I'm surprised there's a place left lower where they can put you. Working-papers for such a boy like you!"

"I'll woik—"

"How I worried myself! Violin lessons yet—thirty cents a lesson out of your papa's pants while he slept! That's how I wanted to have in the family a profession—maybe a musician on the violin! Lessons for you out of money I had to lie to your papa about! Honest, when I think of it—my own husband—it's a wonder I don't potch you just for remembering it. Rudolph, will you stop licking that cake-pan? It's saved for your little brother Leon. Ain't you ashamed even on your little brother's birthday to steal from him?"

"Ma, gimme the spoon?"

"I'll give you the spoon, Isadore Kantor, where you don't want it. If you don't hurry down, the

## HUMORESQUE

way that bell is ringing, not one bite do you get out of your little brother's birthday-cake to-night!"

"I'm goin', ain't I?"

"Always on my children's birthdays a meanness sets into this house! Ru-dolph, will you put down that bowl! Iz-zie—for the last time I ask you—for the last time—"

Erect now, Mrs. Kantor lifted an expressive hand, letting it hover.

"I'm goin', ma; for golly sakes, I'm goin'!" said her recalcitrant one, shuffling off toward the staircase, shuffling, shuffling.

Then Mrs. Kantor resumed her plumbing, and through the little apartment, its middle and only bedroom of three beds and a crib lighted vicariously by the front room and kitchen, began to wind the warm, the golden-brown fragrance of cake in the rising.

By six o'clock the shades were drawn against the dirty dusk of Allen Street and the oilcloth-covered table dragged out center and spread by Esther Kantor, nine in years, in the sturdy little legs bulging over shoe-tops, in the pink cheeks that sagged slightly of plumpness, and in the utter roundness of face and gaze, but mysteriously older in the little-mother lore of crib and knee-dandling ditties and in the ropy length and thickness of the two brown plaits down her back.

There was an eloquence to that waiting, laid-out table, the print of the family already gathered about it; the dynastic high chair, throne of each



**CURBS, STOOPS, AND CELLARS WHOSE WALLS ARE TERRIBLE AND SPONGY WITH FUNGI**



**"ALWAYS ON MY CHILDREN'S BIRTHDAYS A MEANNESS SETS INTO THIS HOUSE"**



**"CHAMMER!"**

## HUMORESQUE

his mother. "Take him! You should be proud of such a little *momser* for a son! Take him, and here you got back his birthday dollar. A feedle! Honest—when I think on it—a feedle!"

Such a rush of outrage seemed fairly to strangle Mr. Kantor that he stood, hand still upraised, choking and inarticulate above the now frankly howling huddle of his son.

"Abrahm, you should just once touch this child! How he trembles! Leon—mamma's baby—what is it? Is this how you come back when papa takes you out to buy your birthday present? Ain't you ashamed?"

Mouth distended to a large and blackly hollow O, Leon, between terrifying spells of breath-holding, continued to howl.

"All the way to Naftel's toy-store I drag him. A birthday present for a dollar his mother wants he should have, all right, a birthday present! I give you my word till I'm ashamed for Naftel, every toy in his shelves is pulled down. Such a cow—that shakes with his head—"

"No—no—no!" This from young Leon, beating at his mother's skirts.

Again the upraised but never quite descending hand of his father.

"By golly! I'll 'no—no' you!"

"Abrahm—go 'way! Baby, what did papa do?"

Then Mr. Kantor broke into an actual tarantella of rage, his hands palms up and dancing.

"What did papa do?" she asks. She's got easy asking. 'What did papa do?' The whole shop, I

## HUMORESQUE

tell you. A sheep with a baa inside when you squeeze on him—games—a horn so he can holler my head off—such a knife like Izzie's with a scissors in it. 'Leon,' I said, ashamed for Naftel, 'that's a fine knife like Izzie's so you can cut up with. All right, then'—when I see how he hollers—'such a box full of soldiers to have war with.' 'Dollar seventy-five,' says Naftel. 'All right, then,' I says, when I seen how he keeps hollering. 'Give you a dollar fifteen for 'em.' I should make myself small for fifteen cents more. 'Dollar fifteen,' I says—anything so he should shut up with his hollering for what he seen in the window."

"He seen something in the window he wanted, Abrahm?"

"Didn't I tell you? A feedle! A four-dollar feedle! A moosicer, so we should have another feedler in the family for some thirty-cents lessons."

"Abrahm—you mean—he—our Leon—wanted a violin?"

"'Wanted,' she says. I could potch him again this minute for how he wanted it! *Du*—you little bum you—*chammer—momser*—I'll feedle you!"

Across Mrs. Kantor's face, as she knelt there in the shapeless cotton-stuff uniform of poverty, through the very tenement of her body, a light had flashed up into her eyes. She drew her son closer, crushing his puny cheek up against hers, cupping his bristly little head in her by no means immaculate palms.

"He wanted a violin! It's come, Abrahm! The dream of all my life—my prayers—it's come!







MEANWHILE, TO A GROWING CONSCIOUSNESS OF DINNER-HOUR, HAD  
ASSEMBLED THE HOUSE OF KANTOR



THE SPLENDOR OF THE VISION

## HUMORESQUE

"Papa will go back for the feedle *not*—three dollars she's saved for herself he can holler out of her for a feedle!"

"Abrahm, he's screaming so he—he'll have a fit."

"He should have two fits."

"Darlink—"

"I tell you the way you spoil your children it will me day come back on us."

"It's his birthday night, Abrahm—five years nce his little head first lay on the pillow next to  
"

"All right—all right—drive me crazy because he's got a birthday."

"Leon baby—if you don't stop hollering you'll nake yourself sick. Abrahm, I never saw him like his—he's green—"

"I'll green him. Where is that old feedle from Isadore—that seventy-five-cents one?"

"I never thought of that! You broke it that time you got mad at Isadore's lessons. I'll run down. Maybe it's with the junk behind the store. I ever thought of that fiddle. Leon darlink—wait! I amma 'll run down and look. Wait, Leon, till amma finds you a fiddle."

The raucous screams stopped then, suddenly, and on their very lustiest crest, leaving an echoing sh across silence. On willing feet of haste Mrs. Kantor wound down backward the high, ladder-like staircase that led to the brass-shop.

Meanwhile to a gnawing consciousness of dinner-r had assembled the house of Kantor. Attuned to the intimate atmosphere of the tenement which

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is so constantly rent with cry of child, child-bearing, delirium, delirium tremens, Leon Kantor had howled no impression into the motley din of things. There were Isadore, already astride his chair, leaning well into center table, for first vociferous tear at the four-pound loaf; Esther, old at chores, settling an infant into the high chair, careful of tiny fingers in lowering the wooden bib.

"Papa, Izzie's eating first again."

"Put down that loaf and wait until your mother dishes up, or you'll get a potch you won't soon forget."

"Say, pop—"

"Don't 'say, pop' me! I don't want no street-bum freshness from you!"

"I mean, papa, there was an up-town swell in, and she bought one of them seventy-five-cent candle-sticks for the first price."

"*Schlemmil! Chammer!*" said Mr. Kantor, rinsing his hands at the sink. "Didn't I always tell you it's the first price, times two, when you see up-town business come in? Haven't I learned it to you often enough a slummer must pay for her nosiness?"

There entered then, on poor, shuffling feet, Man-nie Kantor, so marred in the mysterious and ceramic process of life that the brain and the soul had stayed back sooner than inhabit him. Seventeen in years, in the down upon his face and in growth unretarded by any great nervosity of system, his vacuity of face was not that of childhood, but rather as if his light eyes were peering out from some hinterland and wanting so terribly and so dumbly

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to communicate what they beheld to brain-cells closed against himself.

At sight of Mannie, Leon Kantor, the tears still wetly and dirtily down his cheeks, left off his black, fierce-eyed stare of waiting long enough to smile, darkly, it is true, but sweetly.

"Giddy-app!" he cried. "Giddy-app!"

And then Mannie, true to habit, would scamper and scamper.

Up out of the traplike stair-opening came the head of Mrs. Kantor, disheveled and a smudge of soot across her face, but beneath her arm, triumphant, a violin of one string and a broken back.

"See, Leon—what mamma got! A violin! A fiddle! Look! The bow, too, I found. It ain't much, baby, but it's a fiddle."

"Aw, ma—that's my old violin. Gimme. I want it. Where'd you find—"

"Hush up, Izzie! This ain't yours no more. See, Leon, what mamma brought you. A violin!"

"Now, you little *chammer*, you got a feedle, and if you ever let me hear you holler again for a feedle, by golly! if I don't—"

From his corner, Leon Kantor reached out, taking the instrument and fitting it beneath his chin, the bow immediately feeling, surely and lightly, for string.

"Look, Abrahm, he knows how to hold it! What did I tell you? A child that never in his life seen a fiddle, except a beggar's on the street!"

Little Esther suddenly cantered down-floor, clapping her chubby hands.

"Lookie—lookie—Leon!"

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The baby ceased clattering his spoon against the wooden bib. A silence seemed to shape itself.

So black and so bristly of head, his little clawlike hands hovering over the bow, Leon Kantor withdrew a note, strangely round and given up almost sobbingly from the single string. A note of warm twining quality, like a baby's finger.

"Leon—darlink!"

Fumbling for string and for notes the instrument could not yield up to him, the birdlike mouth began once more to open widely and terribly into the orificial O.

It was then Abrahm Kantor came down with a large hollow resonance of palm against that aperture, lifting his small son and depositing him plop upon the family album.

"Take that! By golly! one more whimper out of you and if I don't make you black-and-blue, birthday or no birthday! Dish up, Sarah, quick, or I'll give him something to cry about."

The five pink candles had been lighted, burning pointedly and with slender little smoke wisps. Regarding them owlshly, the tears dried on Leon's face, his little tongue licking up at them.

"Look how solemn he is, like he was thinking of something a million miles away except how lucky he is he should have a pink birthday-cake. Uh—uh—uh! Don't you begin to holler again. Here, I'm putting the feedle next to you. Uh—uh—uh!"

To a meal plentifully ladled out directly from stove to table, the Kantor family drew up, dipping



"I KNEW IT MUST BE ONE OF MY CHILDREN IF I WAITED LONG  
ENOUGH—AND PRAYED ENOUGH"



AT SEVENTEEN LEON KANTOR HAD PLAYED BEFORE THE CROWNED HEADS OF EUROPE, THE ACHING HEADS OF AMERICAN CAPITAL, AND EVEN THE SHAVED HEAD OF A SOUTH SEA PRINCE

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balconies and stand frankly emotional and jammed in the unreserved space behind the railing which shut them off from the three-dollar seats of the reserved.

At a very special one of these concerts, dedicated to the meager purses of just these, and held in New York's super opera-house, the Amphitheater, a great bowl of humanity, the metaphor made perfect by tiers of seats placed upon the stage, rose from orchestra to dome. A gigantic cup of a Colosseum lined in stacks and stacks of faces. From the door of his dressing-room, leaning out, Leon Kantor could see a great segment of it, buzzing down into adjustment, orchestra twitting and tuning into it.

In the bare little room, illuminated by a sheaf of roses, just arrived, Mrs. Kantor drew him back by the elbow.

"Leon, you're in a draught."

The amazing years had dealt kindly with Mrs. Kantor. Stouter, softer, apparently even taller, she was full of small new authorities that could shut out cranks, newspaper reporters, and autograph fiends. A fitted-over-corsets black taffeta and a high comb in the graying hair had done their best with her. Pride, too, had left its flush upon her cheeks, like two round spots of fever.

"Leon, it's thirty minutes till your first number. Close that door. Do you want to let your papa and his excitement in on you?"

The son of Sarah Kantor obeyed, leaning his short, rather narrow form in silhouette against the closed door. In spite of slimly dark evening clothes



## HUMORESQUE

worked out by an astute manager to the last detail in boyish effects, there was that about him which defied long-haired precedent. Slimly and straightly he had shot up into an unmannered, a short, even a bristly-haired young manhood, disqualifying by a close shave for the older school of hirsute virtuosity.

But his nerves did not spare him. On concert nights they seemed to emerge almost to the surface of him and shriek their exposure.

"Just feel my hands, ma. Like ice."

She dived down into her large silk what-not of a reticule.

"I've got your fleece-lined gloves here, son."

"No—no! For God's sake—not those things! No!"

He was back at the door again, opening it to a slit, peering through.

"They're bringing more seats on the stage. If they crowd me in I won't go on. I can't play if I hear them breathe. Hi—out there—no more chairs! Pa! Hancock—"

"Leon, Leon, ain't you ashamed to get so worked up? Close that door. Have you got a manager who is paid just to see to your comfort? When papa comes, I'll have him go out and tell Hancock you don't want chairs so close to you. Leon, will you mind mamma and sit down?"

"It's a bigger house than the royal concert in Madrid, ma. Why, I never saw anything like it! It's a stampede. God! this is real—this is what gets me, playing for my own! I should have given a concert like this three years ago. I'll do it every

## HUMORESQUE

year now. I'd rather play before them than all the crowned heads on earth. It's the biggest night of my life. They're rioting out there, ma—rioting to get in."

"Leon, Leon, won't you sit down, if mamma begs you to?"

He sat then, strumming with all ten fingers upon his knees.

"Try to get quiet, son. Count—like you always do. One—two—three—"

"Please, ma—for God's sake—please—please!"

"Look—such beautiful roses! From Sol Ginsberg, an old friend of papa's he used to buy brasses from eighteen years ago. Six years he's been away with his daughter in Munich. Such a beautiful mezzo they say, engaged already for Metropolitan next season."

"I hate it, ma, if they breathe on my neck."

"Leon darlink, did mamma promise to fix it? Have I ever let you play a concert when you wouldn't be comfortable?"

His long, slim hands suddenly prehensile and cutting a streak of upward gesture, Leon Kantor rose to his feet, face whitening.

"Do it now! Now, I tell you. I won't have them breathe on me. Do you hear me? Now! Now! Now!"

Risen also, her face soft and tremulous for him, Mrs. Kantor put out a gentle, a sedative hand upon his sleeve.

"Son," she said, with an edge of authority even behind her smile, "don't holler at me!"

## HUMORESQUE

He grasped her hand with his two and, immediately quiet, lay a close string of kisses along it.

"Mamma," he said, kissing again and again into the palm, "mamma—mamma."

"I know, son; it's nerves!"

"They eat me, ma. Feel—I'm like ice! I didn't mean it; you know I didn't mean it!"

"My baby," she said, "my wonderful boy, it's like I can never get used to the wonder of having you. The greatest one of them all should be mine—a plain woman's like mine!"

He teased her, eager to conciliate and to ride down his own state of quivering.

"Now, ma—now—now—don't forget Rimsky!"

"Rimsky! A man three times your age who was playing concerts before you was born! Is that a comparison? From your clippings-books I can show Rimsky who the world considers the greatest violinist. Rimsky he rubs into me!"

"All right, then, the press-clippings, but did Elsass, the greatest manager of them all, bring me a contract for thirty concerts at two thousand a concert? Now I've got you! Now!"

She would not meet his laughter. "Elsass! Believe me, he'll come to you yet! My boy should worry if he makes fifty thousand a year more or less. Rimsky should have that honor—for so long as he can hold it. But he won't hold it long. Believe me, I don't rest easy in my bed till Elsass comes after you. Not for so big a contract like Rimsky's, but bigger—not for thirty concerts, but for fifty!"

"*Brava! Brava!* There's a woman for you.

## HUMORESQUE

More money than she knows what to do with, and then not satisfied!"

She was still too tremulous for banter. "'Not satisfied'? Why, Leon, I never stop praying my thanks for you!"

"All right, then," he cried, laying his icy fingers on her cheek; "to-morrow we'll call a *mignon*—a regular old-fashioned Allen Street prayer-party."

"Leon, you mustn't make fun."

"Make fun of the sweetest girl in this room!"

"'Girl'! Ah, if I could only hold you by me this way, Leon. Always a boy—with me—your poor old mother—your only girl. That's a fear I suffer with, Leon—to lose you to a—girl. That's how selfish the mother of such a wonder-child like mine can get to be."

"All right! Trying to get me married off again. Nice! Fine!"

"Is it any wonder I suffer, son? Twenty-one years to have kept you by me a child. A boy that never in his life was out after midnight except to catch trains. A boy that never has so much as looked at a girl and could have looked at princesses. To have kept you all these years—mine—is it any wonder, son, I never stop praying my thanks for you? You don't believe Hancock, son, the way he keeps always teasing you that you should have a—what he calls—affair—a love-affair? Such talk is not nice, Leon—an affair!"

"Love-affair poppycock!" said Leon Kantor, lifting his mother's face and kissing her on eyes about ready to tear. "Why, I've got something, ma, right here in my heart for you that—"

## HUMORESQUE

"Leon, be careful your shirt-front!"

"That's so—so what you call 'tender,' for my best sweetheart that I— Oh, love-affair—poppycock!"  
She would not let her tears come.

"My boy—my wonder-boy!"

"There goes the overture, ma."

"Here, darlink—your glass of water."

"I can't stand it in here; I'm suffocating!"

"Got your mute in your pocket, son?"

"Yes, ma; for God's sake, yes! Yes! Don't keep asking things!"

"Ain't you ashamed, Leon, to be in such an excitement! For every concert you get worse."

"The chairs—they'll breathe on my neck."

"Leon, did mamma promise you those chairs would be moved?"

"Where's Hancock?"

"Say—I'm grateful if he stays out. It took me enough work to get this room cleared. You know your papa how he likes to drag in the whole world to show you off—always just before you play. The minute he walks in the room right away he gets everybody to trembling just from his own excitements. I dare him this time he should bring people. No dignity has that man got, the way he brings every one."

Even upon her words came a rattling of door, of door-knob, and a voice through the clamor.

"Open—quick—Sarah! Leon!"

A stiffening raced over Mrs. Kantor, so that she sat rigid on her chair-edge, lips compressed, eye darkly upon the shivering door.



**THE SUPER-AMPHITHEATER, FILLED WITH THOSE WHOSE EMOTIONS  
LIE NEXT TO THE SURFACE**



**HE PLAYED, AS IF HIS VERY BLOOD WERE WEEPING, THE "KOL NIDRE,"  
WHICH IS THE PRAYER OF HIS RACE FOR ATONEMENT**

## HUMORESQUE

Sarah, you remember Sol Ginsberg? Say—I should ask you if you remember your right hand! Ginsberg & Esel, the firm. This is his girl, a five years' contract signed yesterday—five hundred dollars an opera for a beginner—six rôles—not bad—*nu!*”

“Abrahm, you must ask Mr. Ginsberg please to excuse Leon until after his concert—”

“Shake hands with him, Ginsberg. He's had his hand shook enough in his life, and by kings, to shake it once more with an old bouncer like you!”

Mr. Ginsberg, not unlike his colleague in rotundities, held out a short, a dimpled hand.

“It's a proud day,” he said, “for me to shake the hands from mine old friend's son and the finest violinist livink to-day. My little daughter—”

“Yes, yes, Gina. Here, shake hands with him. Leon, they say a voice like a fountain. Gina Berg—eh, Ginsberg—is how you stage-named her? You hear, mamma, how fancy—Gina Berg? We go hear her, eh?”

There was about Miss Gina Berg, whose voice could soar to the *tirra-lirra* of a lark and then deepen to mezzo, something of the actual slimness of the poor, maligned Elsa so long buried beneath the buxomness of divas. She was like a little flower that in its crannied nook keeps dewy longest.

“How do you do, Leon Kantor?”

There was a whirl through her English of three acquired languages.

“How do *you* do?”

“We—father and I—traveled once all the way from Brussels to Dresden to hear you. It was

## HUMORESQUE

worth it. I shall never forget how you played the 'Humoresque.' It made me laugh and cry."

"You like Brussels?"

She laid her little hand to her heart, half closing her eyes.

"I will never be so happy again as with the sweet little people of Brussels."

"I, too, love Brussels. I studied there four years with Ahrenfest."

"I know you did. My teacher, Lyndahl, in Berlin, was his brother-in-law."

"You have studied with Lyndahl?"

"He is my master."

"I— Will I some time hear you sing?"

"I am not yet great. When I am foremost like you, yes."

"Gina—Gina Berg; that is a beautiful name to make famous."

"You see how it is done? Gins—berg. Gina Berg."

"Clev—er!"

They stood then smiling across a chasm of the diffidence of youth, she fumbling at the great fur pelt out of which her face flowered so dewily.

"I— Well—we—we—are in the fourth box— I guess we had better be going— Fourth box, left."

He wanted to find words, but for consciousness of self, could not.

"It's a wonderful house out there waiting for you, Leon Kantor, and you—you're wonderful, too!"

"The—flowers—thanks!"

"My father, he sent them. Come, father—quick!"



## HUMORESQUE

Suddenly there was a tight tensity seemed to crowd up the little room.

"Abrahm—quick—get Hancock. That first row of chairs—has got to be moved. There he is, in the wings. See that the piano ain't dragged down too far! Leon, got your mute in your pocket? Please, Mr. Ginsberg—you must excuse— Here, Leon, is your glass of water; drink it, I say. Shut that door out there, boy, so there ain't a draught in the wings. Here, Leon, your violin. Got your neckerchief? Listen how they're shouting! It's for you—Leon—darlink— Go!"

The center of that vast human bowl which had shouted itself out, slim, boylike, and in his supreme isolation, Leon Kantor drew bow and a first thin, pellucid, and perfect note into a silence breathless to receive it.

Throughout the arduous flexuosities of the Mendelssohn E minor concerto, singing, winding from tonal to tonal climax, and out of the slow movement which is like a tourniquet twisting the heart into the spirited *allegro molto vivace*, it was as if beneath Leon Kantor's fingers the strings were 'living vein-cords, youth, vitality, and the very foam of exuberance racing through them.

That was the power of him. The vichy and the sparkle of youth, so that, playing, the melody poured round him like wine and went down seething and singing into the hearts of his hearers.

Later, and because these were his people and because they were dark and Slavic with his Slavic darkness, he played, as if his very blood were weeping,

## HUMORESQUE

the "Kol Nidre," which is the prayer of his race for atonement.

And then the super-amphitheater, filled with those whose emotions lie next to the surface and whose pores have not been closed over with a water-tight veneer, burst into its cheers and its tears.

There were fifteen recalls from the wings, Abrahm Kantor standing counting them off on his fingers and trembling to receive the Stradivarius. Then, finally, and against the frantic negative pantomime of his manager, a scherzo, played so lacily that it swept the house in lightest laughter.

When Leon Kantor finally completed his program they were loath to let him go, crowding down the aisles upon him, applauding up, down, around him until the great disheveled house was like the roaring of a sea, and he would laugh and throw out his arm in widespread helplessness, and always his manager in the background gesticulating against too much of his precious product for the money, ushers already slamming up chairs, his father's arms out for the Stradivarius, and, deepest in the gloom of the wings, Sarah Kantor, in a rocker especially dragged out for her, and from the depths of the black-silk reticule, darning his socks.

"Bravo — bravo! Give us the 'Humoresque' — Chopin Nocturne — Polonaise — 'Humoresque.' Bravo—bravo!"

And even as they stood, hatted and coated, importuning and pressing in upon him, and with a wisp of a smile to the fourth left box, Leon Kantor played them the "Humoresque" of Dvorák, skedaddling,

## HUMORESQUE

plucking, quirking—that laugh on life with a tear behind it. Then suddenly, because he could escape no other way, rushed straight back for his dressing-room, bursting in upon a flood of family already there: Isadore Kantor, blue-shaved, aquiline, and already graying at the temples; his five-year-old son, Leon; a soft little pouter-pigeon of a wife, too, enormous of bust, in glittering ear-drops and a wrist watch of diamonds half buried in chubby wrist; Miss Esther Kantor, pink and pretty; Rudolph; Boris, not yet done with growing-pains.

At the door Miss Kantor met her brother, her eyes as sweetly moist as her kiss.

“Leon darling, you surpassed even yourself!”

“Quit crowding, children. Let him sit down. Here, Leon, let mamma give you a fresh collar. Look how the child’s perspired. Pull down that window, Boris. Rudolph, don’t let no one in. I give you my word if to-night wasn’t as near as I ever came to seeing a house go crazy. Not even that time in Milan, darlink, when they broke down the doors, was it like to-night—”

“Ought to seen, ma, the row of police outside—”

“Hush up, Roody! Don’t you see your brother is trying to get his breath?”

From Mrs. Isadore Kantor: “You should have seen the balconies, mother. Isadore and I went up just to see the jam.”

“Six thousand dollars in the house to-night, if there was a cent,” said Isadore Kantor.

“Hand me my violin, please, Esther. I must have scratched it, the way they pushed.”

## HUMORESQUE

"No, son, you didn't. I've already rubbed it up. Sit quiet, darlink!"

He was limply white, as if the vitality had flowed out of him.

"God! wasn't it—tremendous?"

"Six thousand, if there was a cent," repeated Isadore Kantor. "More than Rimsky ever played to in his life!"

"Oh, Izzie, you make me sick, always counting—counting!"

"Your sister's right, Isadore. You got nothing to complain of if there was only six hundred in the house. A boy whose fiddle has made already enough to set you up in such a fine business, his brother Boris in such a fine college, automobiles—style—and now because Vladimir Rimsky, three times his age, gets signed up with Elsass for a few thousand more a year, right away the family gets a long face—"

"Ma, please! Isadore didn't mean it that way!"

"Pa's knocking, ma! Shall I let him in?"

"Let him in, Roody. I'd like to know what good it will do to try to keep him out."

In an actual rain of perspiration, his tie slid well under one ear, Abrahm Kantor burst in, mouthing the words before his acute state of strangulation would let them out.

"Elsass—it's Elsass outside! He—wants—to sign—Leon—fifty concerts—coast to coast—two thousand—next season! He's got the papers—already drawn up—the pen outside waiting—"

"Abrahm!"

"Pa!"

## HUMORESQUE

In the silence that followed, Isadore Kantor, a poppiness of stare and a violent redness set in, suddenly turned to his five-year-old son, sticky with lollipop, and came down soundly and with smack against the infantile, the slightly outstanding and unsuspecting ear.

"*Momser!*" he cried. "*Chammer! Lump! Gane!* You hear that? Two thousand! Two thousand! Didn't I tell you—didn't I tell you to practise?"

Even as Leon Kantor put pen to this princely document, Franz Ferdinand of Serbia, the assassin's bullet cold, lay dead in state, and let slip were the dogs of war.

In the next years, men, forty deep, were to die in piles; hayricks of fields to become human hayricks of battle-fields; Belgium disemboweled, her very entrails dragging, to find all the civilized world her champion, and between the poppies of Flanders, crosses, thousand upon thousand of them, to mark the places where the youth of her allies fell, avenging outrage. Seas, even when calmest, were to become terrible, and men's heart-beats, a bit sluggish with the fatty degeneration of a sluggard peace, to quicken and then to throb with the rat-a-tat-tat, the rat-a-tat-tat of the most peremptory, the most reverberating call to arms in the history of the world.

In June, 1917, Leon Kantor, answering that rat-a-tat-tat, enlisted.

In November, honed by the interim of training to even a new leanness, and sailing-orders heavy and light in his heart, Lieutenant Kantor, on two days'





"IF ONLY YOU WOULD LET MAMMA SEW THAT LITTLE BAG INSIDE YOUR UNIFORM WITH A  
LITTLE PLACE FOR BILLS AND A LITTLE PLACE FOR LOVE."

## HUMORESQUE

"Oughtn't she be ashamed of herself? Just listen to her, Esther! What will we do with her? Talks like she had a guarantee I wasn't coming back. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if by spring I wasn't tuning up again for a coast-to-coast tour—"

"Spring! That talk don't fool me. Without my boy, the springs in my life are over—"

"Why, ma, you talk like every soldier who goes to war was killed! There's only the smallest percentage of them die in battle—"

"'Spring,' he says; 'spring'! Crossing the seas from me! To live through months with that sea between us—my boy maybe shot—my—"

"Mamma, please!"

"I can't help it, Leon; I'm not one of those fine mothers that can be so brave. Cut out my heart, but leave my boy! My wonder-boy—my child I prayed for!"

"There's other mothers, ma, with sons!"

"Yes, but not wonder-sons! A genius like you could so easy get excused, Leon. Give it up. Genius it should be the last to be sent to—the slaughter-pen. Leon darlink—don't go!"

"Ma, ma—you don't mean what you're saying. You wouldn't want me to reason that way! You wouldn't want me to hide behind my—violin."

"I would! Would! You should wait for the draft. With my Roody and even my baby Boris enlisted, ain't it enough for one mother? Since they got to be in camp, all right, I say, let them be there, if my heart breaks for it, but not my wonder-child! You can get exemption, Leon, right away for the



## HUMORESQUE

asking. Stay with me, Leon! Don't go away! The people at home got to be kept happy with music. That's being a soldier, too, playing their troubles away. Stay with me, Leon! Don't go leave me—don't—don't—"

He suffered her to lie, tear-drenched, back into his arms, holding her close in his compassion for her, his own face twisting.

"God! ma, this—this is awful! Please—you make us ashamed—all of us! I don't know what to say. Esther, come quiet her—for God's sake quiet her!"

From her place in that sobbing circle Esther Kantor crossed to kneel beside her mother.

"Mamma darling, you're killing yourself. What if every family went on this way? You want papa to come in and find us all crying? Is this the way you want Leon to spend his last hour with us—"

"Oh, God—God!"

"I mean his last hour until he comes back, darling. Didn't you just hear him say, darling, it may be by spring?"

"'Spring'—'spring'—never no more springs for me—"

"Just think, darling, how proud we should be! Our Leon, who could so easily have been excused, not even to wait for the draft."

"It's not too late yet—please—Leon—"

"Our Roody and Boris both in camp, too, training to serve their country. Why, mamma, we ought to be crying for happiness. As Leon says, surely the Kantor family, who fled out of Russia to escape



**A WALL OF LIVING FLESH WAS THROBBING AND HEDGING HIM IN**



**NO WORD BETWEEN THEM, ONLY AN UNFINISHED SWEETNESS WAITING  
TO BE LINKED UP**



"REMEMBER, ESTHER, WHILE I'M GONE, THE ROYALTIES FROM THE DISCAPHONE RECORDS ARE YOURS"

## HUMORESQUE

She was for greeting every one, a wafted kiss to Mrs. Kantor, and then, arms wide, a great bunch of violets in one outstretched hand, her glance straight, sure, and sparkling for Leon Kantor.

"Surprise—everybody—surprise!"

"Why, Gina—we read—we thought you were singing in Philadelphia to-night!"

"So did I, Esther darling, until a little bird whispered to me that Lieutenant Kantor was home on farewell leave."

He advanced to her down the great length of room, lowering his head over her hand, his puttee-clad legs clicking together. "You mean, Miss Gina—Gina—you didn't sing?"

"Of course I didn't! Hasn't every prima donna a larynx to hide behind?" She lifted off her fur cap, spilling curls.

"Well, I—I'll be hanged!" said Lieutenant Kantor, his eyes lakes of her reflected loveliness.

She let her hand linger in his. "Leon—you—really going? How—terrible! How—how—wonderful!"

"How wonderful—your coming!"

"I— You think it was not nice of me—to come?"

"I think it was the nicest thing that ever happened in the world."

"All the way here in the train I kept saying, 'Crazy—crazy—running to tell Leon—Lieutenant—Kantor good-by—when you haven't even seen him three times in three years—'"

"But each—each of those three times we—we've remembered, Gina."

"But that's how I feel toward all the boys, Leon—

## HUMORESQUE

our fighting boys—just like flying to them to kiss them each one good-by.”

“Come over, Gina. You’ll be a treat to our mother. I— Well, I’m hanged! All the way from Philadelphia!”

There was even a sparkle to talk, then, and a let-up of pressure. After a while Sarah Kantor looked up at her son, tremulous, but smiling.

“Well, son, you going to play—for your old mother before—you go? It’ll be many a month—spring—maybe longer, before I hear my boy again except on the discaphone.”

He shot a quick glance to his sister. “Why, I—I don’t know. I—I’d love it, ma, if—if you think, Esther, I’d better.”

“You don’t need to be afraid of me, darlink. There’s nothing can give me the strength to bear—what’s before me like—like my boy’s music. That’s my life, his music.”

“Why, yes; if mamma is sure she feels that way, play for us, Leon.”

He was already at the instrument, where it lay, swathed, atop the grand piano. “What’ll it be, folks?”

“Something to make ma laugh, Leon—something light, something funny.”

“‘Humoresque,’” he said, with a quick glance for Miss Berg.

“‘Humoresque,’” she said, smiling back at him.

He capered through, cutting and playful of bow, the melody of Dvorák’s, which is as ironic as a grinning mask.

## HUMORESQUE

Finished, he smiled at his parent, her face still untearful.

"How's that?"

She nodded. "It's like life, son, that piece. Crying to hide its laughing and laughing to hide its crying."

"Play that new piece, Leon—the one you set to music. You know. The words by that young boy in the war who wrote such grand poetry before he was killed. The one that always makes poor Mannie laugh. Play it for him, Leon."

Her plump little unlined face innocent of fault, Mrs. Isadore Kantor ventured her request, her smile tired with tears.

"No, no—Rosa—not now! Ma wouldn't want that!"

"I do, son; I do! Even Mannie should have his share of good-by."

To Gina Berg: "They want me to play that little arrangement of mine from Allan Seegar's poem. 'I Have a Rendezvous . . . .'"

"It—it's beautiful, Leon. I was to have sung it on my program to-night—only, I'm afraid you had better not—here—now—"

"Please, Leon! Nothing you play can ever make me as sad as it makes me glad. Mannie should have, too, his good-by."

"All right, then, ma, if—if you're sure you want it. Will you sing it, Gina?"

She had risen. "Why, yes, Leon."

She sang it then, quite purely, her hands clasped simply together and her glance mistily off, the

## HUMORESQUE

beautiful, the heroic, the lyrical prophecy of a soldier-poet and a poet-soldier:

“But I’ve a rendezvous with Death  
On some scarred slope of battered hill,  
When spring comes round again this year  
And the first meadow-flowers appear.”

In the silence that followed, a sob burst out, stifled, from Esther Kantor, this time her mother holding her in arms that were strong.

“That, Leon, is the most beautiful of all your compositions. What does it mean, son, that word, ‘rondy-voo’?”

“Why, I—I don’t exactly know. A rendezvous—it’s a sort of meeting, an engagement, isn’t it, Miss Gina? Gina? You’re up on languages. As if I had an appointment to meet you some place—at the opera-house, for instance.”

“That’s it, Leon—an engagement.”

“Have I an engagement with you, Gina?”

She let her lids droop. “Oh, how—how I hope you have, Leon.”

“When?”

“In the spring?”

“That’s it—in the spring.”

Then they smiled, these two, who had never felt more than the merest butterfly wings of love brushing them, light as lashes. No word between them, only an unfinished sweetness, waiting to be linked up.

Suddenly there burst in Abrahm Kantor, in a carefully rehearsed gale of bluster.



"CUT OUT MY HEART FROM ME, BUT LET ME KEEP MY BOY—MY  
WONDER-BOY"



